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ABSTRACT

As a follow-up to the Central Wisconsin Writing Project, a writing survey was prepared to (1) introduce the concept of writing across the curriculum to high school faculty in the district, (2) determine the district's need for inservice in writing across the curriculum, (3) establish the validity of the data, (4) collect information about writing expectations in high school courses other than English, and (5) use the information as a basis for creating strategies and inservice specially designed to meet the needs of non-English teachers. The survey was administered during October 1980 to departments of social studies, science, business education, driver education, physical education, home economics, industrial arts, and agriculture. The results indicated that 62% of the teachers did not connect the learning of course concepts to the ability to explain them in writing. Seventy-six percent felt that all written work should be read and evaluated by the teacher, but while 50% indicated that writing ability had some effect on grade, no more than 10% said it had a major role in grading. Over 50% said that little or no teaching time was spent on activities to improve writing, and most teachers had their students taking notes on a daily basis. No other type of written assignment received much attention other than short answers on worksheets. (HOD)

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Survey: Writing In The Content Area

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Wausau West High School
1980-81

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INTRODUCTION

As a follow-up of the Central Wisconsin Writing Project at UW-Stevens Point, June 23-27, 1980, a Writing Survey was prepared by James Briggs and Greg Venne, English teachers, and James Kraft, sociology teacher. Its purpose was to introduce the concept of writing across the curriculum to high school faculty in our district, determine our district's need for inservice in writing across the curriculum, establish the validity of our data, and collect information about writing expectations in high school courses other than English, and to use this information as a basis for creating strategies and inservices specially designed to meet the needs of non-English teachers.

The survey consists of eight parts:

1. a brief introduction with directions,
2. a series of questions on subject area and number and grade level of students,
3. a series of general background questions on the role of writing in instruction,
4. a series of questions on the overall importance of writing in instruction; and sets of questions on
5. kinds of writing assignments used in given courses and their frequency,
6. the importance of various writing skills in evaluation and grading,
7. concepts, approaches and methods and their frequency, and
8. problems and errors in student work and their frequency.

The survey was administered during October 1980 to sixteen non-English departments: Social Studies, Science, Business Ed., Driver Ed., Phys. Ed., Home Economics, Industrial Arts and Agriculture at both Wausau East and Wausau West High Schools. Standardized tests indicate that Wausau District students perform above national norms in the area of writing.

Respondents participated at a series of specially arranged meetings, with at least one of the authors present to direct the survey and to answer questions. The typical completion time varied from ten minutes to a half hour. When the survey was completed, response percentages were calculated in all areas, objective narrative reports were prepared, and conclusions were drawn.

Our first four questions gave us specific department information. We surveyed 81 teachers in 16 departments who represented 6,564 student contacts in their answers. We asked for the grade level of the students and determined that the answers reflected a good cross section of about 22 per cent freshmen, 24 per cent sophomores, 29 per cent juniors and 25 per cent seniors.

GENERAL STATEMENTS BY AREA

Item 5

A majority, 62 per cent, of those surveyed indicated that they did not connect the learning of course concepts to the ability to explain them in writing.

Item 6

An even bigger percentage, 76 per cent, felt that all written work should be read and evaluated by the teacher.

Item 7

Still bigger, 86 per cent, said writing assignments should not be used as a means of discipline.

Item 8

A portion of what students read in a course was written by teachers. Thirty-six per cent indicated they had written some of the material, and 36 per cent said they had written a majority of the material. We have no data to indicate what percentage of the total volume of reading this represents.

Item 9

Although 50 per cent indicated that writing ability had some effect on grade, no more than 10 per cent said it had a major role in grading and no one said

writing ability was totally connected to a grade. Forty per cent felt writing ability had little or no effect on a course grade.

Item 10

Teachers did indicate that they spent some time on activities to improve writing. Forty per cent responded that a part of their curriculum included such tasks. However, over 50 per cent said that little or no teaching time was spent on these tasks.

Items 11-24 (Kinds and Frequency of Assignments) - See Graph 1

This section dealt with the type of writing assignments used in a course.

According to the response, ~~four~~ 41 per cent of the teachers had students taking notes on a daily basis. An additional 33 per cent had students take notes about once a week.

No other type of written assignment received much attention on a daily basis other than 96 per cent indicated students worked on short answers in instruments like worksheets.

On the other end of the scale, teachers assigned no poetry and 88 per cent never assigned imaginative work. Correspondence was also an infrequent assignment, with 68 per cent never requiring it in course work. Book reports, critiques and reviews were also seldom requested, with 48 per cent never requiring such written work. Few teachers asked students to paraphrase course material, with 51 per cent never requiring it ~~done~~. In a similar vein, narrative reports were never requested by 46 per cent; however, on this item 30 per cent asked for such papers a few times a semester, and a few teachers, three per cent, used it daily.

Graph 1 indicates the percent of responses given for "a few times a quarter," "about once a week," and "almost daily." It is assumed that these categories represent the minimum amount of repetition needed for writing skills to develop. (It is recognized that research/resource papers are so large that they are often

only assigned once a semester. Therefore, that statistic may be deceptive. It should be added, however, that 51 per cent of the teachers said they never give such an assignment.)

If there is any truth to the adage that practise makes perfect, the imperfect writing of high school students has a good explanation. Although teachers indicate they assign note taking, short answers and essays with some frequency, they do not require much in any other variety or form of writing. We might assume that it is within these other forms of writing, students will find the opportunity to experiment and polish different structures and styles. Thinking about the order of ideas in one type of writing can aid in the order in other forms. Moreover, a variety of writing tasks creates the awareness for order and structure that many students fail to discover. We contend that this failure is due to the narrowness and infrequency of their writing tasks.

Items 25-37 (Importance of Writing Skills in Evaluation and Grading) - See Graph 2

Virtually all respondents said that how well the student understood the assignment was an important factor in their grading, and nearly all (90 per cent) said that how well the student fulfilled his own thesis or purpose was rated from important to primary. Use of introduction and conclusion was regarded as secondary by over half of the teachers; it can also be noted that only 20 per cent felt that the use of introduction was at least a major criterion, while more than twice that number similarly rated the use of conclusions. Organization of ideas and effective use of detail were rated as "important" or higher by 87 per cent and 80 per cent of the respondents, respectively. The term "transition" drew a 44 per cent response in the middle category, with other responses divided evenly. Forty to 49 per cent of the teachers identified mechanical elements as "important." The remaining reponses showed a tendency toward identifying these elements as of limited or no importance. This clearly suggests that

whatever difficulties might arise from poor mechanics, mechanics as a whole are not a significant factor in the evaluation of written work in non-English classes.

Graph 2 indicates the percentage of teachers identifying various writing skills as "major" or "primary" criteria in grading written assignments. (If the "important but secondary" category were to be added, it would not alter the top three choices. It would, however, greatly increase the percentages for items of mechanics.)

Although, as we will see later, items of mechanics are frequently identified as problems, they do not have a major role in grading. Those outside of education can easily judge that if students pay few or no penalties for poor mechanics in school writing, then whatever attitudes arise from this freedom will transfer to their eventual field of work. In addition, in spite of the fact that a majority of the teachers (62%) disagreed with the statement, "If students can't explain course concepts in writing they have not really learned them," they grade on items based on that very assumption!

Items 38-46 (Concepts, Approaches and Methods) - See Graph 3

In this entire section, responses indicated that no concepts were used oftener than a few times per quarter. Brainstorming sessions, the use of models or examples, and student-teacher conferences seemed to be the most popular, but even in these areas the frequency was oftener than a few times a quarter in only half the cases.

Outlining, plus the two conference items were seldom used, and the two remedial measures, rough drafts and guided revisions, drew 49 per cent and 60 per cent "never" responses respectively, and only two per cent and four per cent oftener than a few times a quarter.

Graph 3 indicates the percentage of teachers responding to "a few times a quarter," "about once a week," or "almost daily." The highest "never" use

response (60%) was to guided revision, followed by rough draft (49%) and oral reading of student work (49%).

Graph 3 would better be labeled "Infrequency of Use" for it points out the minor role that teaching of writing skills plays in classes outside the English department. It is here that the philosophical problem arises. Those surveyed could contend that students learn course concepts well enough through practices other than those found in the writing process. Teachers of writing might contend that it is the critical thinking nurtured by outlines, rough drafts and guided revisions that produces the coherent content.

Items 47-57 (Problems and Errors) - See Graph 4

This section asked teachers how frequently they found specific problems in writing.

As could be expected, teachers saw spelling as a frequent and constant problem. Forty-two per cent saw it as common and 37 per cent saw it as constant. Likewise, teachers found all mechanical areas as frequent and constant problems in writing. A sizeable majority found incomplete sentences, poor punctuation and incorrect sentence structure common and frequent problems.

Lack of proof reading and revision bothered many teachers. Forty-one per cent found it common, and over 50 per cent indicated it as a frequent and constant problem.

In contrast, plagiarism did not appear as big a problem as other areas. Thirty-one per cent saw it as an occasional problem and 32 per cent saw it as common. In the same trend, teachers found poor transition as a common to occasional problem. Inaccurate or poor content was in the same percentage range with 43 per cent finding it an occasional problem and 33 per cent finding it as a common problem. Sixty-two per cent of those surveyed felt misunderstood assignments were only an occasional problem.

Graph 4 indicates the percentage of teachers identifying problems as "common," "frequent" or "constant." (If just the categories "frequent" or "constant" are used, the top four items all still rank well above a 50 per cent response.) Plagiarism got the highest "almost never" response at 15 per cent.

To no one's surprise, misspelling is ranked first (97%), but tied with it is lack of proof reading and revision. These are followed by use of incomplete sentences (86%), poor punctuation (85%), poor organization (84%) and incorrect sentence structure (78%).

Out of the ten categories provided, only in one area (understanding assignments) did over half the teachers see a problem as occurring only occasionally or less (66%).

These figures could substantiate two other results. One, teachers do not require prewriting activities, and two, teachers do not insist on correct mechanics in grading written work.

Implications for Inservice

With 62 per cent of our respondents not connecting the learning of course concepts to the ability to explain them in writing, our task goes beyond simply explaining the view we hold that writing is an essential way of learning. Teachers will need to discover the connection through their own content. Perhaps as they attempt to isolate the proofs of learning in their area, written work and the writing process will stand out as the most effective means to learning. We may need to ask teachers to provide themselves with examples of proofs of learning by models which exclude writing, and to explain how they feel learning occurs. Models of how learning takes place and how teachers can measure that learning may well point out the relationship to writing and literate written work.

Asking teachers to write about their own content may be one of the most direct methods of dealing with this attitude. As teachers write they may make several discoveries. Perhaps they will see the struggle their students face with their assignments. With such an experience, teachers may find means to restructure their assignments as well as find a need to supply instruction and advice to their students on the process they ask them to use. We hope to provide this experience to a group of Driver Education teachers in the near future. We discovered when administering the survey, that this department assigns a chapter from the Driver Manual to be rewritten by those students who fail an exam on that chapter. Rewrite meant recopy word for word. Although the teachers assigned this for review purposes, we wondered what would be gained through copying a chapter. We will not ask these teachers to recopy this chapter for their own frustration, but we will ask them to summarize and paraphrase various segments. Our aim is to demonstrate the directed thinking required in summaries and paraphrases in contrast to the mere hand movements required in copying. From this we will work with the department to create specific writing assignments that reinforce those skills.

In relation, our survey indicates that teachers spend little time on tasks to improve student writing. As teachers experience the writing process (we know most teachers have been away from it since college) they will realize the value instruction can have to the student. Again, we can go to Driver Education for an example for inservice. After assigning a research project, the teachers continue to teach other content while waiting for the due date. Course time is not taken on the assignment after the project is given. We would ask the teachers to construct a model project considered acceptable by their standards, and we would assist them in identifying the steps they used in the process. Once completed, this process could be used as part of the course structure. Most important, teachers will struggle to get ideas clear as they put them on

paper. That satisfaction may lead to the clearer understanding of course concepts through writing.

Our problem will be to construct the method by which to get teachers writing and to provide guides to aid in reconstructing curriculum to provide for more writing and writing instruction. It would also be our contention that students would benefit from a wider variety of writing assignments. Other than note taking, teachers limited writing tasks to short answers and essay questions on tests. Items such as paraphrasing and summarizing are not often asked of students. Perhaps assignments of a different nature, requiring application of various writing skills, can improve literacy.

The survey also indicates that teachers take little time in prewriting activities. It is in this specific area of writing that most of the learning and understanding occur. Not only do we need to encourage rough drafts and guided revisions and the like, we need to redirect the use of time. We recognize that teachers will be reluctant to give up course time for what appears to be the content of another department. However, it is their content that will benefit through increased literacy. Once we can make that connection, time will not be the objection.

The area of mechanics, spelling and related structures in writing courses is the greatest puzzle for inservice. The survey would indicate that although these areas do not greatly affect a grade on written work, they are frequently and constantly found in student writing. We question this inconsistency on the part of teachers. If such a keen awareness of mechanical errors exists, they must be a problem. We know for many students it is an obstacle to communication. This poses a series of questions. Do we admit failure on the part of the English department and promise to do better? Do we blame it on the media and any other dozen curses that plague man's attempt to be literate? Maybe they would accept an elaborate explanation as how the kids got messed up

in middle and grade school. We might risk spending a week or two going over grammar and spelling lessons so they might in turn correct and instruct their students. If all this doesn't seem plausible, perhaps we could just rationalize with them that kids think they don't have to write well for non-English teachers because they have established a history of poor writing standards. Any of the above approaches could result in our being guided or more probably thrown through the inservice door.

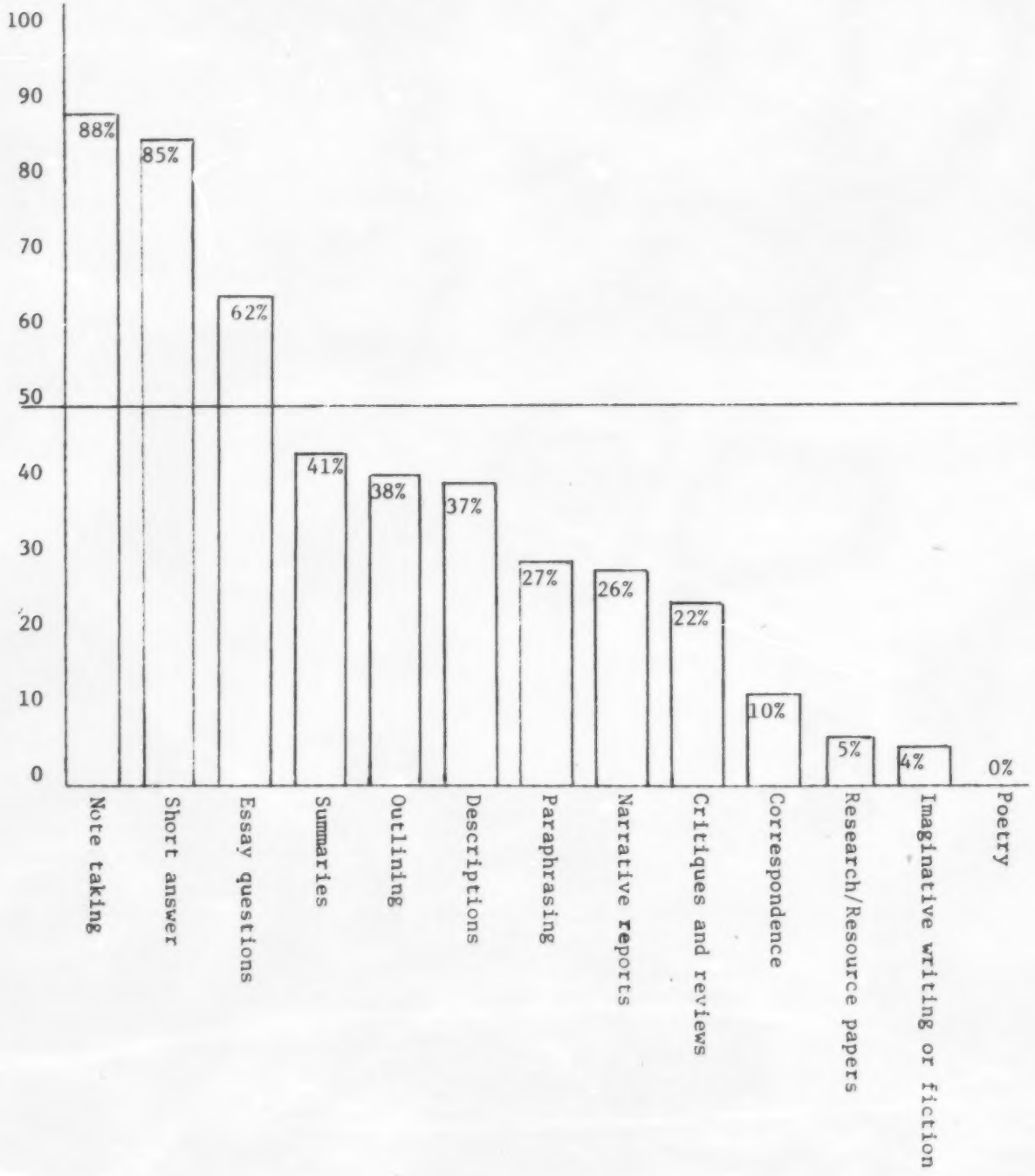
Our cynical nature will have to give way to some more practical approach. An inservice program will need at least to show teachers that literacy is their problem, and that they will need to take some responsibility for writing standards. This does not mean they will need to become grammarians or lexicographers. It may mean that standards exist within their own content that should not be overlooked. As part of an inservice program, teachers may benefit through learning the holistic grading of papers. This method easily shows the common standards most teachers carry for written work. From this exercise a group of teachers can visibly establish their grading standards. Or, it may be useful to initiate a grading system that gives value to the more visible skills of literacy. Inservice might provide techniques of grading that lend themselves to efficient grading of written work as well as establish methods that assist students in perfecting skills that they are primarily exposed to in the English classroom.

Above all, the inservice program will need to direct their thinking to the writing process that evolves into literacy. Once that process gets connected to that content, mechanical and structural problems may begin to disappear.

Graph 1

The question was: Several kinds of writing assignments are listed. Please indicate how frequently they are used in your course.

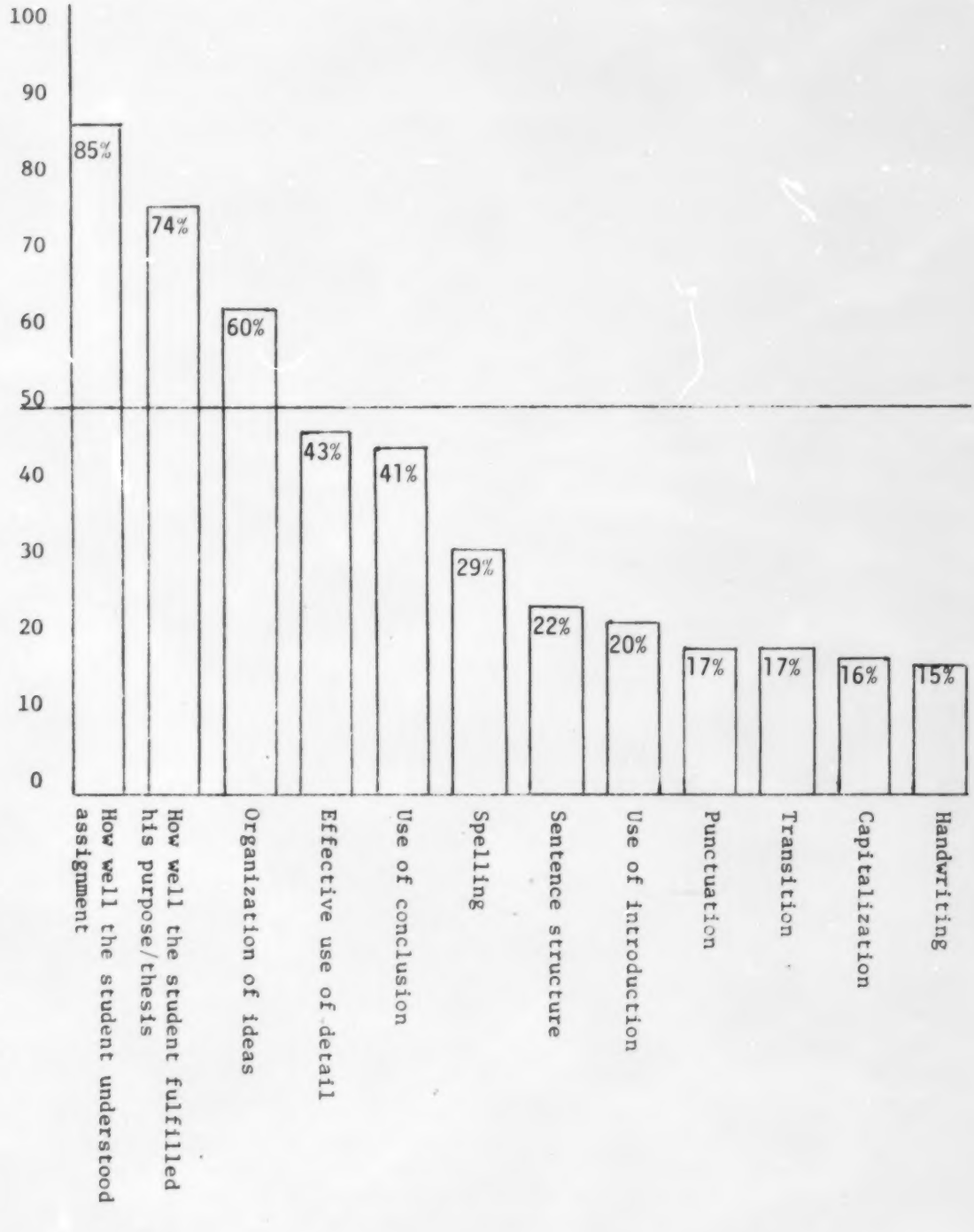
Answer options: (1) Never; (2) A few times a semester; (3) A few times a quarter; (4) About once a week; (5) Almost daily.



Graph 2

The question was: When you give grades to written assignments, how important are the following?

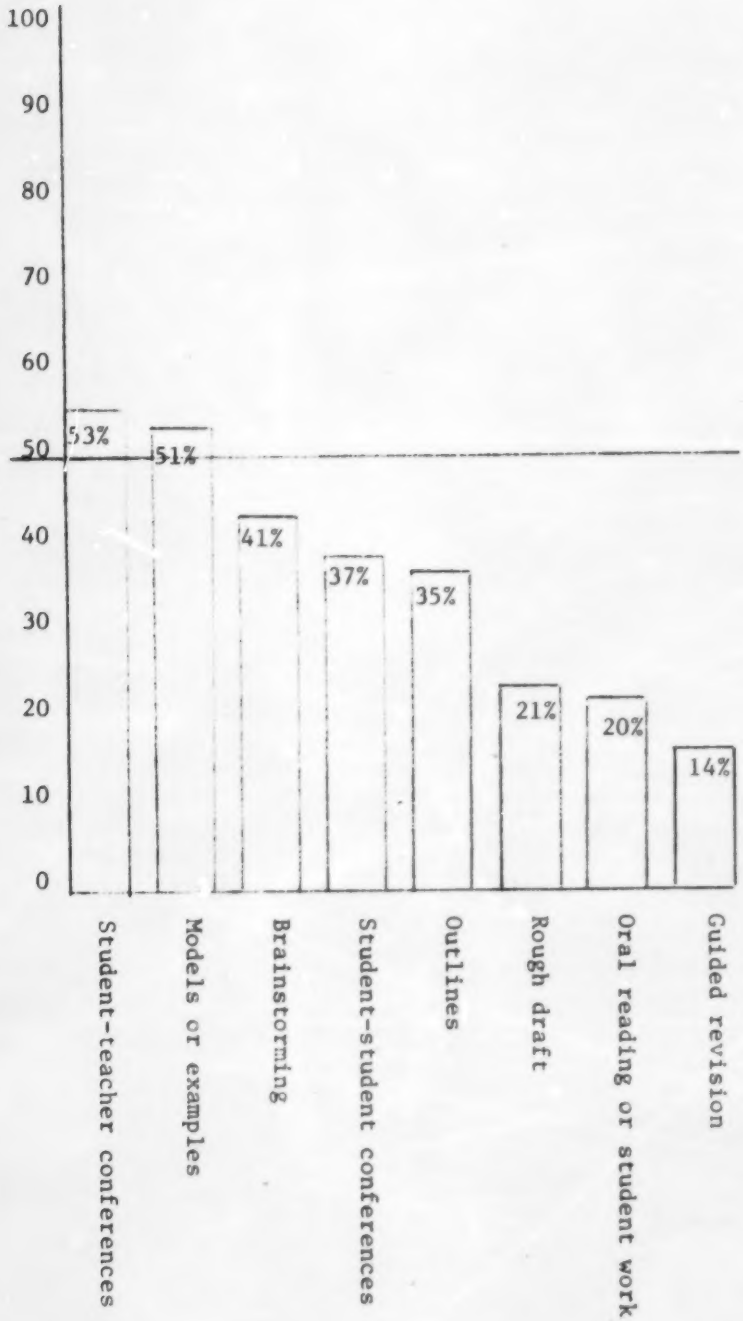
Answer options: (1) Of little or no importance; (2) Of limited importance; (3) Important, but secondary to other criteria; (4) A major criterion; (5) A primary criterion.



Graph 3

The question was: How often do you use the following concepts in your course in connection with written assignments?

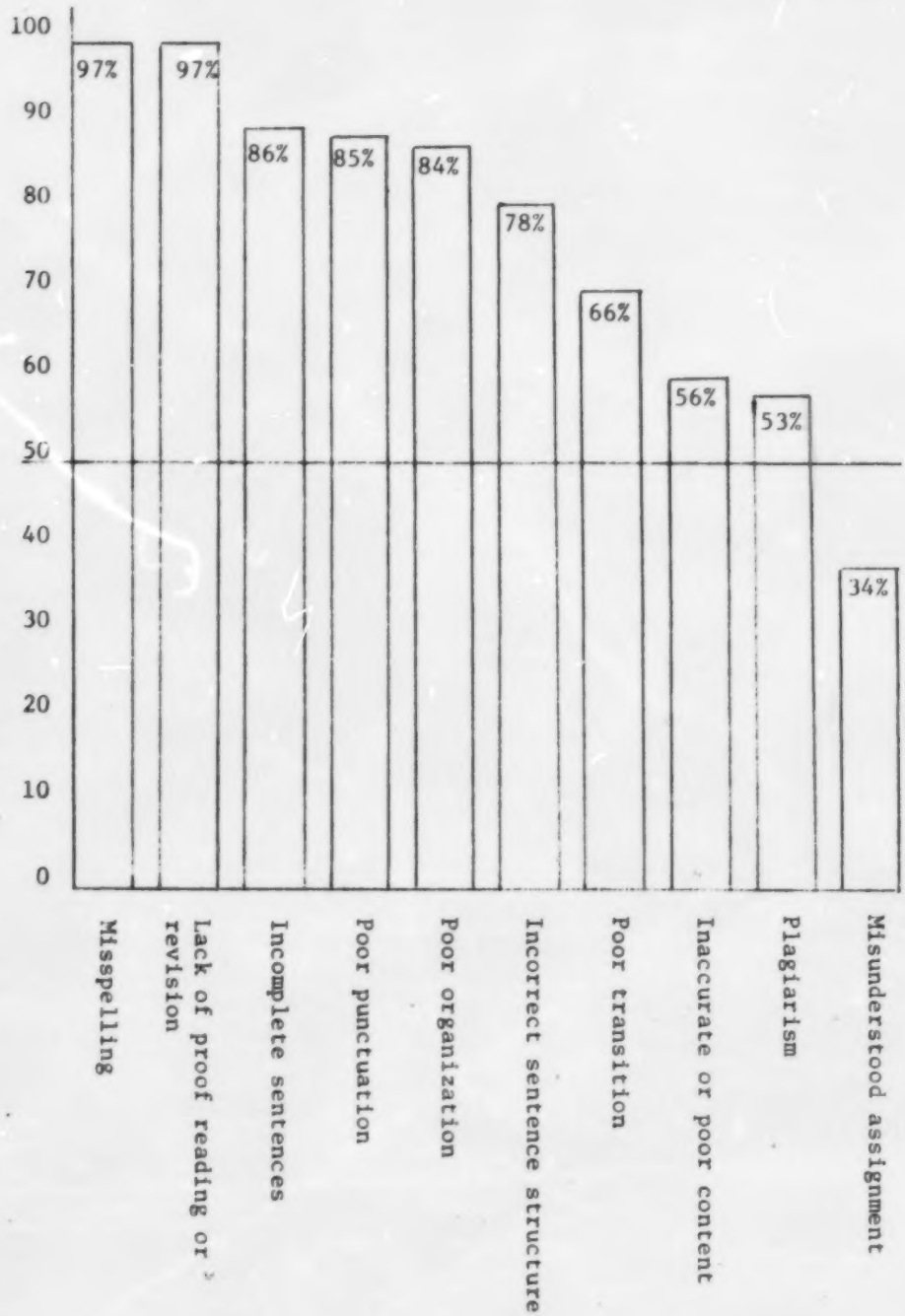
Answer options: (1) Never; (2) A few times a semester; (3) A few times a quarter; (4) About once a week; (5) Almost daily.



Graph 4

The question was: Several writing problems are listed. Please indicate how frequently you find them in student writing.

Answer options: (1) Almost never; (2) Occasional; (3) Common; (4) Frequent; (5) Constant.



Writing Survey

Jim Briggs
Jim Kraft
Greg Venne

We would appreciate your help in collecting information about writing expectations in departments other than English. We will use the information to design teaching strategies that will improve the quality of the kinds of student writing that you need in your courses.

If you teach several courses which have different student writing expectations please answer the questions as they apply to just one of the courses.

All survey questions, of course, are open to various interpretations. It has been found that the collective results are most accurate when people follow their first impressions. We would ask you to respond on that basis. Thank you for your time and assistance.

1. Department _____

2. Course title _____

3. Number of students _____

4. Grade level of majority of students (check one)

   _____Freshmen

   _____Sophomores

   _____Juniors

   _____Seniors

   _____Mixed

Please check the appropriate response as it applies to you and the course you teach.

Agree	Disagree	Don't know		
33%	62%	5%	5.	If students can't explain course concepts in writing they have not really learned them.
76%	22%	2%	6.	All student written work for a course should be read and evaluated by the teacher.
10%	86%	4%	7.	Writing assignments should be used as one means of disciplining students.

Please circle the appropriate number as it applies to your teaching.

None		A little		Some		A majority		All		
1	1%	2	21%	3	36%	4	36%	5	4%	8. How much of what your students read (tests, assignments, handouts, etc.) have been written by you?
1	9%	2	31%	3	50%	4	10%	5		9. How much does student writing ability affect course grades?
1	27%	2	32%	3	40%	4	9%	5	1%	10. How much teaching time do you spend on tasks to improve student written work?

Several kinds of writing assignments are listed below. Please indicate how frequently they are used in your course.

Never		A few times a semester		A few times a quarter		About once a week		Almost daily		
1	6%	2	6%	3	14%	4	33%	5	41%	11. Note taking
1	39%	2	24%	3	24%	4	13%	5	1%	12. Outlining
1	13%	2	25%	3	40%	4	22%	5		13. Essay questions
1	5%	2	11%	3	43%	4	33%	5	9%	14. Short answer questions (single paragraphs on tests, worksheets, etc.)
1	27%	2	31%	3	27%	4	12%	5	2%	15. Summaries
1	51%	2	21%	3	13%	4	11%	5	4%	16. Paraphrasing
1	25%	2	38%	3	25%	4	8%	5	4%	17. Descriptions
1	46%	2	29%	3	14%	4	9%	5	3%	18. Narrative reports
1	48%	2	30%	3	16%	4	6%	5		19. Critiques and reviews (including book reports)
1	51%	2	44%	3	5%	4		5		20. Research or resource papers
1	88%	2	8%	3	4%	4		5		21. Imaginative writing or fiction (excluding poetry)
1	100%	2		3		4		5		22. Poetry
1	68%	2	21%	3	4%	4	3%	5	3%	23. Correspondence (letters, memos, etc.)
1		2		3		4		5		24. Other _____ (Explain)

When you give grades to written assignments, how important are the following?

Of little or no importance		Of limited importance		Important, but secondary to other criteria		A major criterion		A primary criterion			
1	1%	2	1%	3	12%	4	51%	5	34%	25.	How well the student understood the assignment
1	7%	2	3%	3	16%	4	42%	5	32%	26.	How well the student fulfilled his purpose/ thesis
1	25%	2	21%	3	33%	4	16%	5	4%	27.	Use of introduction
1	17%	2	19%	3	23%	4	33%	5	8%	28.	Use of conclusion
1	4%	2	9%	3	39%	4	26%	5	21%	29.	Organization of ideas
1	7%	2	13%	3	29%	4	37%	5	14%	30.	Effective use of detail
1	18%	2	20%	3	44%	4	17%	5		31.	Transition
1	5%	2	24%	3	40%	4	18%	5	11%	32.	Spelling
1	9%	2	19%	3	48%	4	16%	5	6%	33.	Sentence structure
1	9%	2	27%	3	47%	4	9%	5	8%	34.	Punctuation
1	11%	2	29%	3	45%	4	8%	5	8%	35.	Capitalization
1	12%	2	32%	3	42%	4	11%	5	4%	36.	Handwriting
1		2		3		4		5		37.	Other _____

_____
(Explain)

How often do you use the following concepts in your course in connection with written assignments?

Never	A few times a semester	A few times a quarter	About once a week	Almost daily		
1 34%	2 31%	3 19%	4 12%	5 4%	38.	Outlines
1 49%	2 29%	3 19%	4 1%	5 1%	39.	Rough drafts
1 60%	2 26%	3 10%	4 4%	5 0%	40.	Guided revisions
1 29%	2 29%	3 26%	4 10%	5 5%	41.	Brainstorming
1 10%	2 38%	3 38%	4 7%	5 8%	42.	Student-teacher conferences
1 46%	2 17%	3 22%	4 9%	5 6%	43.	Student-student conferences
1 49%	2 30%	3 14%	4 5%	5 1%	44.	Oral reading of student work
1 28%	2 22%	3 22%	4 18%	5 11%	45.	Models or examples
1	2	3	4	5	46.	Other _____ (Explain)

Several writing problems are listed below. Please indicate how frequently you find them in student writing.

Almost never	Occasional	Common	Frequent	Constant		
1	2 3%	3 18%	4 42%	5 37%	47.	Misspelling
1 4%	2 10%	3 29%	4 35%	5 22%	48.	Incomplete sentences
1 3%	2 12%	3 28%	4 41%	5 16%	49.	Poor punctuation
1 3%	2 14%	3 38%	4 29%	5 17%	50.	Poor organization
1 4%	2 18%	3 41%	4 27%	5 10%	51.	Incorrect sentence structure
1 4%	2 62%	3 25%	4 7%	5 7%	52.	Misunderstood assignments
1 1%	2 43%	3 33%	4 12%	5 11%	53.	Inaccurate or poor content
1 3%	2 32%	3 44%	4 11%	5 11%	54.	Poor transition
1 15%	2 31%	3 32%	4 11%	5 10%	55.	Plagiarism
1	2 3%	3 41%	4 27%	5 29%	56.	Lack of proof reading and revision
1	2	3	4	5	57.	Other _____ (Explain)